

## **PROMOTING THE ETHICAL SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL ETHICS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS<sup>1</sup>**

*Discussion paper presented by Dr Kathie Forster of the University of Technology Sydney to the symposium on The Ethics of the Teaching Profession, 10 December 1998.*

What does it mean to talk about the ethical school? Surely schools are by nature ethical since they are directed to human improvement. Yet schools are also organisations and settings for interaction between human beings and as such they sometimes fall short of ethical standards.

An ethical school is characterised by an ethical culture. This means that the ethical nature of the core business of schools, namely their devotion to the wellbeing of young people, remains at the forefront and that ethical concerns embedded in schools' everyday activities are explicit, accepted and openly acknowledged.

### **WHAT ARE SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ETHICAL CULTURE IN SCHOOLS?**

First and foremost, an ethical school will be characterised by ethical awareness. Teachers will be sensitive to the ethical implications of their own policies and practices as well as those of the school and the system, for example child protection policies and classroom discipline practices.

Second, there is acceptance by school personnel of responsibilities for their actions, both individually and collectively. That is, an acceptance of responsibility by each individual for their personal ethics as professionals and for the ethics of the organisation as a whole.

This acceptance of responsibility will be manifest in the practices of the teachers and the school overall, practices that will be recognisably and consciously ethical and will be guided by ethical principles embodied in a code.

### **CODES OF CONDUCT AND CODES OF ETHICS**

More should be said about different codes which purport to guide professional practice. Many organisations develop a code of conduct for their employees. Such codes are prescriptive. They set out specific but minimal guidelines for their employees' conduct. The NSW Department of Education and Training has developed such a code for its employees.

There also exist *codes of ethics*. These are aspirational. They usually contain a smaller number of general or fundamental principles which will be of particular importance in instances where a code of conduct is silent or unclear. A code of ethics is better than a code of conduct for ensuring long term commitment to important values because it demands something more than mere compliance. It calls for people to exercise judgment and take responsibility for decisions they make.

There will be times when an education system must prescribe the conduct it expects of its employees because the demands of the wellbeing of the children will override other considerations. Hence, there is a place for a code of conduct. Its purpose is to change staff behaviour in the first instance, and the dispositions and attitudes of staff in the longer term. Examples we are familiar with in New South Wales would be the proscription of improper conduct of a sexual nature on the part of teachers and of corporal punishment.

Forbidding such behaviour by means of a code of conduct may help to make staff sensitive to their own behaviour and its ethical implications, so that it can be a form of ethics education (Lichtenberg,

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from [www.schools.nsw.edu.au/edu\\_leadership/prof\\_read](http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/edu_leadership/prof_read)

1996). However, prescribing how staff are to behave by regulation will have very limited success in promoting ethical professionals and an ethical school.

This can be illustrated clearly by referring to child protection policies. Such policies are essential but on their own they are insufficient as events in this state over the past 18 months have demonstrated. There are many reasons why a set of regulations will be inadequate to ensure that children are properly protected.

For a start, regulations cannot cover every case. There will sometimes be special circumstances which require the people on the spot to make choices between competing goods, or competing evils. In such cases complex ethical judgments will be called for.

Second, precise regulations create a climate in which people feel able to abandon any sense of personal responsibility, once they have done what is required of them. ('I have notified my school principal of my concerns and need take no further interest in the matter.')

Third, precise regulations can reinforce a 'culture of compliance' in which doing the right thing comes to be equated with following instructions, regardless of their content and regardless of the gaps or flaws they contain.

Fourth, if no attempt is made to help teachers explicitly reflect upon and internalise an ethical standard which includes an understanding of the purposes of the regulations and a commitment to those purposes, teachers' behaviour may be reduced to legalistic rule-following or minimalist compliance, where the letter of the law is observed but its spirit is not.

Accordingly, a code of ethics will be required as well as a code of conduct if we are concerned to promote ethical schools. More will be said about this shortly.

## **WHAT ELSE CHARACTERISES AN ETHICAL CULTURE IN A SCHOOL?**

Teachers need an awareness of what lies behind ethical choices.. Ethical conduct requires decision-making and, accordingly, judgment, especially in those situations where it seems to be a matter of choosing between competing or conflicting values. For example, judgment is required in a case where attending to the wellbeing of one child (eg. a child with a disability) may appear to require less attention to the wellbeing of the other children in the class.

Judgment in these instances requires awareness of competing ethical principles. Various moral theories underlie ethical choices, theories such as the following:

- Utilitarianism, or the determination of the value of an act by referring to its moral consequences;
- Deontological principles, or the appeal to general principles such as justice, human rights or respect for persons;
- An ethics of care, or being guided in each case by care, compassion and a concern for the human relationships within the situation;
- Virtue theory, or the valuing of dispositions appropriate to human flourishing and an integrated life;
- Communitarianism, or the appeal to the shared and evolving traditions of one's community (Preston, 1996).

## **ETHICAL SCHOOLS AS ETHICAL COMMUNITIES**

A comprehensive account of teacher ethics would examine each of the above moral theories more

closely. In this paper I want to focus particularly on the notion of the school as a community, since my concern is with the ethical character of the school seen as a collectivity. The distinctively ethical features of the ethical school community would include the following:

First, an ethical school is one where the people within it care about each others' wellbeing and seek to promote that wellbeing.

Second, in such a setting, ethics is seen as something that is positive, something to be consciously promoted in the human relationships within the community rather than a 'conscience', or something that serves to constrain us.

Third, notions of wellbeing and of others as persons worthy of respect and consideration are not abstract or impersonal, driven by principles that are applied regardless of circumstances, but are built upon an awareness of how each person is different and special. Each person within the school community is seen as a fully rounded individual.

Fourth, the previous feature does not deny the importance of consistency and justice as essential for an ethical community. Rather these principles are pursued in a context where an emphasis is placed on the value of each person in a concrete, particular sense.

Fifth, children are persons too. Not only should they be treated respectfully and caringly but they should be being taught to treat everyone else respectfully and caringly.

Sixth, the actions of the professional educators in each school and especially of the school leaders should be guided by a concern to build up their particular school as a caring community where every person is valued and helped to contribute to the wellbeing of the whole school community.

## **WHAT DOES THIS KIND OF ETHICAL CULTURE REQUIRE?**

It is evident that the promotion of an ethical school as envisaged here will require that priority be given to the quality of the human relationships within the school community. For a start, attention will be paid to the microcosmic relationships within the school, relationships between teacher and student, teacher and teacher, teacher and parent, student and student, and between school administrator and each of the above. These relationships should be characterised by trust, respect and concern based on an understanding and awareness of each other as a real and unique person.

In addition, attention should be paid to the macrocosmic interactions between groups, acknowledging that all those within the school community are members of social groups and that their group membership will help define their identity. These social groups will not only be the obvious ones of teachers, students and parents but will also be related to ethnic, racial, gender and even geographical factors.

It will be important for school communities to have structures and processes that acknowledge group identities and promote respectful and caring group interactions.

As I stated earlier, the ethical character of the school should be explicit and conscious. The kinds of relationships and interactions I've just described need to be deliberately included within a school's collective vision and to be continuously and consciously pursued. In other words, an ethical culture is always in a state of becoming. The process of creating it is both ongoing and educational.

Much can be said about the educational process involved in promoting an ethical school community. It is evident that teachers and the enhancement of teacher ethics are of fundamental importance to the endeavour. In the remainder of this paper, I will therefore concentrate on a significant element of teacher professional development and teacher ethics by which teachers can be assisted to play their part in the construction of the ethical school.



## ETHICS TRAINING AND ETHICS EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS

As noted above, an education system such as the NSW Department of Education and Training will need to prescribe certain conduct for its personnel on ethical grounds and will produce a Code of Conduct to serve this purpose. The induction of teachers, especially new teachers, in the Code of Conduct will be necessary and can take the form of an ethics training program. In general, such programs are directed to imparting knowledge, understanding and skills needed by employees for them to share in the task of supporting and maintaining the ethos of the organisation.

A typical ethics training program would encompass the following phases:

- the induction of individuals into the ethos of the organisation;
- the introduction and exploration of the organisation's formal codes of ethics and conduct;
- the development of dispositions appropriate to the organisation's ethos;
- the development of a critical capacity to identify (and where possible correct) practices and procedures that are inimical to the task of maintaining and developing the organisation's ethos; and
- the development of a critical capacity to reflect on the organisation's founding principles. (Longstaff, 1994a)

An ethics training program such as the above could be directed to assisting teachers to appropriately exercise their professional responsibilities in relation to particular policies addressed within a Code of Conduct, such as child protection policies. But it must be said at once that 'top-down' ethics training of this type will not be sufficient to equip teachers and administrators to make the complex ethical judgments that school teaching from time to time requires. That will require ethics education. If teachers are to be enabled to make the contribution which only they can make in building ethical school communities they need to play a much more active role in their education in ethics.

Ethics education is essential if teachers are to be ethical decision-makers. Ethics education involves the imparting of knowledge, understanding and skills that will enable the individual autonomously and authentically to develop and maintain an ethical framework that is their own. In other words, ethics education is directed towards moral autonomy.

### A SCHOOL-BASED CODE OF ETHICS

In implementing ethics education for teachers a valuable first step would be to encourage teachers to develop their own code of ethics. Such a code will only assist school staff members to become ethical decision-makers and contribute to the building of ethical school communities if it is internalised by staff members. The most effective way for this 'ownership' or internalisation to occur is for the staff members within a school to develop the code themselves.

Some suggestions (based on the guidelines developed by Longstaff, 1994b) can be made for the process of developing a code of ethics that will be an effective working document in a school.

- A good starting point is to conduct a 'values audit'. This would involve asking the school staff to indicate:
  - what they think are the most important values the school stands for;
  - how prominent they believe each of these values *ought* to be in the school; and
  - how prominent they believe each of these values *actually* is in the school.

This activity will begin to identify a 'values gap' and can provide a springboard for a code of ethics as the development of a set of principles which will contribute to closing that gap.

- Guidance should be given to schools by indicating a number of issues that should be incorporated in the code, for example confidentiality; a broad statement of the rights and responsibilities of students, teachers and parents; and protection of 'whistle-blowers'.
- Within that framework, the code of ethics should be hammered out by the school staff members themselves. The outcome is more likely to be relevant to the daily experiences of that school while the process will reflect the principle that all individuals within the organisation are respected and will promote a culture in which trust is engendered and value differences are acknowledged and negotiated.
- It will be important to 'test' the code by applying it to authentic ethical dilemmas confronted by school staff members.
- The process of developing the code should not be allowed to take too long but it should be done in such a way as to retain the sense of ownership sought at the outset.
- The code should be reviewed at regular intervals to avoid becoming 'stale' and forgotten.
- The fact that different schools will develop different codes should be encouraged provided that the principles in the code are consistent with the overall ethical principles espoused by the system. Schools should go through the process of developing their own codes rather than using a code already developed at another school. The *process* is extremely important.

## **THE ROLE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IN PROMOTING AN ETHICAL SCHOOL**

It can be inferred from the above account that school administrators will have a vital contribution to make to the promotion of an ethical school. In this final section I will draw out the implications of my account for school administrators and then outline how they can be supported in their role.

The clearest way in which school administrators can contribute to an ethical school culture is to lead by example, particularly in their relations with the other members of the school community. As suggested above, such relationships should be characterised by respect, trust and consideration.

In addition to providing an example in this respect the school administrator has a more formal leadership role. Among other things, she should encourage ethical discourse within the staffroom by encouraging the discussion of ethical questions by staff members; she should set in train a procedure for developing a school-based code of ethics along the lines suggested above; she should include the ethical scrutiny of school policies and practices within the regular processes of whole school self-evaluation for which she is responsible; and she should promote the shared responsibility that is a hallmark of an ethical school community by working for genuinely collaborative decision-making structures and processes.

Many of these activities entail a considerable broadening of the role of the school administrator and it is vital that this broadening takes place for if school leaders do not lead the way in professional ethics there is little chance that an ethical culture will emerge. Accordingly, school administrators will require support in this enhancement of their role. In what ways can they be supported?

For a start, school administrators in their turn should see appropriate role models within the education system, for example at district level. Principals and their executive staff should be participating in relationships beyond the school that have the same characteristics as the relationships I have been advocating within the school. This presents a challenge in a huge education system such as the NSW public school system and it is something to which a great deal of thought needs to be given, at all levels of the system. It will also be important for schools to be

encouraged to take responsibility for their own ethical conduct and for system leaders not to try to take care of all ethical issues by regulation. (As noted above, some matters of ethical conduct must be addressed by regulation; but it is equally important to recognise the flaws in the top-down approach.) Further, school administrators, like teachers, are not likely to have an extensive background in ethics and they should be encouraged to take courses in this area. Support networks will also be beneficial to promote and maintain the broadening of the school administrator's role to encompass ethical leadership. Partnerships with appropriate university personnel, for example in district based-networks, would be of benefit to all concerned.

This paper has approached the question of teacher ethics by focusing attention on schools, the places where teachers carry out their work. It has strongly advocated a view of teachers as ethical decision-makers. At the same time, it has put forward some suggestions for the content of teacher ethics that encompasses the notion of schools as having collective responsibility for ethical policies and practices, that is, for schools as ethical communities. It has argued that a central feature of such ethical communities is to be found in the relationships between the participants in the school community. It has also argued that the ethical growth of the school community should be acknowledged as an explicit and ongoing process for which everyone has some responsibility. Finally, it has acknowledged the crucial role that school leaders will play in the process of building ethical school communities. It is of fundamental importance that schools be encouraged and supported in their growth in this direction.

## REFERENCES

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